

Catholic inculturation in Vietnam, the Philippines, and South Korea: a comparative study

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Abstract

In the context of globalisation and the growing interplay between religion, politics, and culture, the inculturation of Catholicism in Asia presents a significant case for examining how universal faith traditions adapt within diverse socio-political environments. This study addresses two main problems, namely, (a) what forms of Catholic inculturation have emerged in Vietnam, the Philippines, and South Korea, and (b) how cultural traditions, historical trajectories, and political frameworks shape these processes. Adopting a comparative case-study approach, the research employs thematic content analysis of triangulated secondary sources, including scholarly literature, official state and Church documents, and institutional reports, within a theoretical framework that conceptualises inculturation as a dialogue between the Gospel and local culture. The findings identify three distinctive models: (a) the Philippines demonstrates ‘comprehensive integration’, where Catholicism is deeply embedded in national identity; (b) South Korea illustrates ‘contestation and adaptation’, where Catholic identity was forged through persecution, conflict, and socio-political activism; and (c) Vietnam reflects ‘adaptation within boundaries’, where Catholicism develops under a socialist legal framework while aligning with cultural and national principles. By highlighting the salient influence of political authority and historical pathways, this study contributes a refined comparative framework for

understanding Catholic inculturation in Asia, moving beyond purely cultural explanations to show how contextualisation can operate as cultural integration, a socio-political force, or a state-accommodated (socialist-oriented) form of adaptation.

Dalam konteks globalisasi serta menguatnya relasi antara agama, politik, dan budaya, inkulturasi Katolik di Asia menjadi lensa penting untuk menelaah bagaimana tradisi iman universal beradaptasi dalam konfigurasi sosial-politik yang beragam dalam dinamika masyarakat kontemporer kini. Penelitian ini mengkaji bentuk-bentuk inkulturasi Katolik di Vietnam, Filipina, dan Korea Selatan, serta peran tradisi budaya, lintasan historis, dan kerangka politik dalam membentuk proses tersebut. Dengan pendekatan studi kasus komparatif, penelitian ini menggunakan analisis isi tematik terhadap sumber sekunder yang ditriangulasi, meliputi literatur ilmiah, dokumen resmi negara dan Gereja, serta laporan kelembagaan dalam kerangka teoretis yang memandang inkulturasi sebagai dialog berkelanjutan antara Injil dan budaya lokal. Hasil kajian mengidentifikasi tiga model: Filipina menunjukkan “integrasi komprehensif” ketika Katolik terjalin kuat dalam identitas nasional; Korea Selatan merepresentasikan “kontestasi dan adaptasi” ketika identitas Katolik dibentuk melalui penganiayaan, konflik, dan aktivisme sosial-politik; sedangkan Vietnam menggambarkan “adaptasi dalam batas-batas” ketika Katolik berkembang di bawah kerangka hukum sosialis sembari menyelaraskan diri dengan prinsip budaya dan kebangsaan. Dengan menegaskan pengaruh penting otoritas politik dan lintasan historis, penelitian ini menawarkan kerangka komparatif yang lebih tajam untuk memahami inkulturasi Katolik di Asia, melampaui penjelasan kultural semata, serta menunjukkan bagaimana kontekstualisasi dapat mengambil bentuk integrasi kultural, kekuatan sosial-politik, atau adaptasi yang diakomodasi negara (berorientasi sosialis).

Keywords: *Catholic inculturation, Vietnam, The Philippines, South Korea, Comparative case study.*

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Introduction

In an era of globalisation and increasing cultural interconnectivity, religious traditions of Western origin, such as Roman Catholicism, face the persistent challenge of remaining faithful to universal doctrines while simultaneously embedding themselves profoundly within indigenous cultural contexts. This process, known as inculturation or contextualisation, is particularly critical for Catholicism in East Asia (Francisco, 2017). Building upon a critical synthesis of foundational theories, this study conceptualises inculturation as a dynamic and often inwardly contested theological process that extends far beyond mere liturgical adjustment or symbolic adaptation (Schreiter, 1985: 5-16). At its heart, it constitutes a creative relationship between universal faith experience and the totality of a specific context — encompassing its cultural, historical, social, and political structures (Bevans, 2002: 3-28). This process demands a critical, mutual transformation: the Gospel message finds vibrant expression through indigenous categories and practices, while the receiving culture is itself sanctified, refined, and elevated by the faith. The ultimate direction is towards an organic integration, where the Christian experience permeates and orients a community from within (Shorter, 1988: 5-11).

From this analytical standpoint, the significance of inculturation is thus not merely theoretical; its contemporary import lies in providing a dynamic framework for Christianity to engage with pressing twenty-first-century challenges. These range from the rise of ethno-nationalism and identity-based conflict, to tensions between tradition and modernity, and the search for sustainable and harmonious models of development. By deeply understanding and integrating into local cultures, Christianity can transcend its historical role as an external force to become a trusted partner in the work of peacebuilding and the advancement of social justice. This is especially pertinent in Asia, where nations with robust indigenous religious and philosophical traditions (e.g., Confucianism, Buddhism, folk beliefs) provide a clear illustration of this dynamic,

demanding nuanced approaches to navigate between authentic dialogue and the risks of syncretism or a loss of religious identity (Tan, 1999).

The selection of Vietnam, the Philippines, and South Korea as comparative case studies is deliberate. They represent three distinct models of religious landscape and religion-state dynamics. The Philippines exemplifies a nation with an overwhelming Catholic majority, where the Church holds a dominant socio-cultural position (Landy, 2025). South Korea presents a case of rapid Catholic growth and a notable integration of Confucian ritual practices, such as ancestor veneration, into Christian worship (Kilkelly, 2017: 7). As a minority religion in Vietnam's socialist society, Catholicism engages in inculturation within a well-defined state policy on religious affairs. This policy aims to ensure that all religious activities, including the integration of faith with local culture, are conducted lawfully and respectfully, taking into account the nation's specific historical and social context (Vietnam Government Committee for Religious Affairs [GCRA], 2013).

This study aims to fill a discernible gap in the existing scholarship. While numerous historical and sociological studies have examined the Catholic Church in the Philippines, South Korea, or Vietnam in isolation, there is a scarcity of cross-national comparative analysis of inculturation strategies, particularly concerning the influence of political institutions and cultural structures. This essay intends to contribute to the theory of inculturation in Asia by proposing an analytical framework that incorporates variables such as the social standing of Catholicism, the degree of engagement with indigenous rituals, ecclesiastical leadership roles, and state policy. The specific research objectives are: (a) to identify and categorise the predominant modes of inculturation evident in these three countries; (b) to elucidate the factors that either facilitate or hinder inculturation in each case, with particular attention to political conditions, cultural traditions, and ecclesiastical structures; (c) to conduct a systematic comparison across the three cases to delineate commonalities and divergences, thereby

proposing a more refined analytical model for inculturation in East Asia; (4) to derive practical implications for intercultural and interreligious dialogue, as well as for religious governance in multicultural nations.

To address the objectives, this study adopts a comparative case study approach as its principal methodological framework, which is well-suited to analysing the nuanced differences and commonalities of Catholic inculturation across three distinct socio-political and cultural contexts (Vietnam, the Philippines, and South Korea). The comparative design enables the identification of context-specific drivers of inculturation, whilst also illuminating overarching patterns that may inform a more refined analytical model for East Asian Catholicism, in line with the study's research objectives.

Data collection relies primarily on secondary sources, including scholarly literature (theological analyses, sociological studies, and historical accounts), official documents, and empirical reports. Scholarly works are selected to capture academic debates on inculturation, such as discussions of liturgical adaptation, ancestor veneration, and indigenous theological frameworks, with an emphasis on peer-reviewed articles and dissertations specific to each country. Official documents include state policies (e.g., Vietnam's 2016 Law on Belief and Religion, GCRA publications), Church guidelines (e.g., pastoral letters from the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam, statements from the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences), and institutional reports (e.g., Agenzia Fides' statistical data on South Korea's Catholic population, the Philippine Statistics Authority's religious affiliation census). These sources offer insights into the formal structures that shape inculturation, including state–Church dynamics and ecclesiastical leadership priorities.

To ensure analytical rigour, a thematic content analysis is applied to the collected data. Key themes are derived from the study's research questions, focusing on: (a) the forms of inculturation (e.g., ritual adaptation, liturgical localisation, socio-political engagement); (b) influencing factors (cultural

traditions such as Confucianism or folk beliefs, political systems, and the social standing of Catholicism); and (c) tensions or facilitators of inculturation (e.g., syncretism concerns, Vatican authority, state regulation). Data are coded and categorised by country first, then cross-referenced across cases to identify divergences (e.g., majority versus minority Catholic status) and commonalities (e.g., engagement with ancestral traditions). On this basis, the study's comparative design and thematic analysis provide an analytically robust approach to identifying convergences and divergences across the three contexts and tracing the socio-cultural and political factors that shape patterns of Catholic inculturation.

Inculturation scholarship across Vietnam, the Philippines, and South Korea

The theoretical framework of religious inculturation (also referred to as contextualisation) is central to analyzing how Catholicism becomes embodied within specific cultural contexts. According to scholars like Basas (2020), inculturation transcends mere adaptation of liturgy or rituals; it constitutes a continuous dialogue between the Gospel and local culture. The objective is to make the faith authentically 'incarnate' within the concrete life of the local community, preserving cultural identity whilst maintaining fidelity to the Church's universality. Echoing this, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) has emphasised that since the Asian Synods, developing indigenous theologies and cultural expressions in liturgy is considered an essential task for Asian Churches, not an optional extra (Kroeger, 2020).

In the Philippines, scholarly work has extensively examined how inculturation operates through liturgical practices, popular piety, and the use of vernacular languages. For instance, Michael M. Ramos (2015) analyses how Filipino theologians reinterpret the Gospel through indigenous cultural frameworks, producing a theology that is simultaneously intellectually rigorous

and culturally resonant. Similarly, Fabella (1999) demonstrates that inculturation is not merely accommodation but a relationship of mutuality, where the local populace actively reinterprets symbols and rituals, imbuing them with a distinctly Filipino character. The use of local languages in liturgy, the incorporation of indigenous music, and the integration of folk festivals into the liturgical calendar are clear manifestations of this process (Seah, 2014).

Regarding South Korea, although less literature is available in English compared to the Philippine context, theological and sociological studies indicate that the Catholic Church there has sought to harmonise Confucian-based ancestral rites (Jesa) with Catholic liturgical law. Once a contentious issue, ancestor veneration has gradually gained acceptance in some Korean Catholic communities as a form of ritual inculturation, provided it is reinterpreted within a Christian monotheistic framework, distancing it from polytheistic connotations (Seong, 2024). Many Korean Catholics practice a modified form of Jesa within the family context, adjusted to align with Catholic doctrine. This reconciliation was significantly advanced by the official sanction of the Korean Catholic Church in the twentieth century, which established clear guidelines for a Christianised. In contemporary Korea, this adaptation often transforms the rite from a religious obligation into a cultural expression of filial piety and familial remembrance, core values shared by both Confucianism and Christianity (Kim et al., 2022).

In Vietnam, the inculturation of Catholicism has been studied extensively in relation to indigenous beliefs (particularly ancestor veneration), Confucian traditions, Chinese cultural influences, and the state's religious policy. Scholars like Anne Chieu Hien Nguyen (2001, pp. 17-22) have analysed how Vietnamese Catholics position ancestral altars below the Christian altar or incorporate ancestral imagery into worship spaces, interpreting the practice as filial piety rather than deification, thus connecting it to Christian faith. Recently, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam issued guidelines on the veneration of ancestors, aiming not to erase positive traditional values but to sanctify these

virtuous customs, thereby integrating national culture with Catholic values in rituals such as funerals and weddings (UCA News, 2019). The pervasive practice of ancestor veneration in Vietnamese society, involving home altars, incense offerings, and grave visits, provides a significant cultural context for this dialogue. In addition, state religious policy plays a crucial role in shaping the inculturation of Catholicism (Evans et al., 2024). Since *Đổi mới* (Renovation), official regulations such as the 2016 Law on Belief and Religion have both recognised religious freedom and required alignment with socialist values and national unity (Nguyen & Vu, 2022). This framework has encouraged the Catholic Church to reinterpret practices like ancestor veneration in culturally meaningful yet doctrinally acceptable ways, integrating Catholic faith with national traditions under state oversight.

Emerging comparative studies note significant variations in inculturation strategies influenced by each nation's socio-political context. In the Philippines, where Catholicism holds a majority status, inculturation initiatives (e.g., indigenous liturgies, folk festivals) often encounter fewer regulatory constraints. Conversely, in Vietnam, where Catholicism functions as a recognised religion within the legal framework of a socialist state, the process is characterised by a deliberate and guided approach. Inculturation initiatives are implemented through carefully considered pathways, ensuring alignment with both doctrinal orthodoxy and national cultural and legal norms. This approach, while potentially requiring more time to build a broad consensus, reflects a responsible commitment to sustainable development and harmony between faith and national cultural identity (Bien, 2025; Pham, 2020). Notwithstanding substantial case-specific studies, significant gaps remain. There is a scarcity of systematic comparative analysis of inculturation across the Philippines, South Korea, and Vietnam. Furthermore, discourse analysis of official Church documents and public policies to examine how inculturation is formally reasoned or explained is underdeveloped. Finally, research often lacks updated analysis considering recent

socio-political shifts, such as new episcopal guidelines in Vietnam, evolving social dynamics in South Korea, and the impacts of globalisation and media.

Overall, existing research indicates that: (1) inculturation is implemented across multiple dimensions: ritual, liturgy, music, language, architecture, and imagery; (2) indigenous culture (language, folk beliefs, ancestral traditions, festivals) acts not merely as ‘raw material’ but as an active partner in a cultural dialogue; (3) state policy and the social standing of Catholicism significantly influence the degree and form of inculturation; (4) theological and practical barriers persist, such as perceptions of ancestor veneration as syncretistic or fears of doctrinal dilution.

Three models of inculturation

The Philippine case

The Philippines stands as a unique case in Asia, being the only country where Catholicism is the predominant religion, with approximately 79% of the population identifying as adherents (Mapa, 2023). This reflects the faith’s extensive inculturation since the Spanish colonial period. Its success is linked to the integration of Catholicism into local customs, festivals, and social institutions, creating a strong alignment between religious belief and national identity. Scholars such as John N. Schumacher (1966) have argued that this cultural fusion enabled Catholicism to evolve from an imported religion into an integral part of Filipino identity.

A prominent feature of inculturation in the Philippines is the vibrant tradition of community fiestas, which blend religious observance with cultural celebration. More concretely, festivals such as the Sinulog in Cebu (honouring the Santo Niño), Ati-Atihan in Aklan, and Pahiyas in Lucban (venerating San Isidro Labrador - the patron saint of farmers and harvests) demonstrate the incorporation of indigenous music, dance, and art into Catholic rituals. However, this ‘blending’ was often a strategic form of cultural appropriation by Spanish

missionaries. Indigenous elements were retained but stripped of their original spiritual meanings and repurposed to make Catholic doctrines more palatable, ensuring the faith's dominance while effectively marginalising pre-colonial belief systems (Tamayo, 2022). In other words, inculturation is evident in the acceptance and blending of indigenous spiritual elements, particularly in 'folk healing' practices and devotions to local saints (Astorga, 2025). This 'popular religiosity' has been described by researchers as a form of lived theology, where believers creatively develop pious practices that are connected to their daily lives. For example, the devotion to the Black Nazarene in Quiapo, Manila, is not merely a religious event but also an expression of collective faith and hope for the urban poor (Deguma, Case-Deguma & Tandag, 2019). Therefore, the studies demonstrate that this adaptability has reinforced the Church's social role, establishing it as a 'common cultural language' that fosters community cohesion and reaffirms national identity.

Nevertheless, this very dominance can function as a tool of cultural homogenisation, implicitly framing non-Catholic groups, such as Muslim communities in Mindanao and indigenous peoples, as outside the mainstream national identity (Miller, 2014). In other words, this is not merely a passive outcome but an active process: the profound entanglement of Catholicism with Filipino nationhood ensures that its symbolic lexicon, ritual calendar, and ethical frameworks become inextricably linked with national culture itself. Consequently, the traditions of religious minorities are often marginalised, not through overt suppression, but by being rendered less visible and less legitimate within the dominant public sphere (Magdalena, 2018). This cultural dynamic fosters a latent hierarchy of belief, wherein Catholic perspectives disproportionately shape national narratives, educational paradigms, and the very terms of public moral debate. The resultant homogenisation, therefore, does more than merely constrain authentic religious pluralism; it actively reifies long-standing social cleavages. By naturalising Catholic culture as the national default, it inadvertently

reinforces ‘the otherness’ of minority groups, thereby complicating the already delicate projects of meaningful interfaith dialogue and a genuinely inclusive civic nation-building.

Moreover, the Philippine Catholic Church also plays a central socio-political role. Movements like the ‘1986 People Power Revolution’ demonstrated their capacity to mobilise public opposition to the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. The leadership of Cardinal Jaime Sin, combined with support from grassroots Catholic communities, positioned the Church as a significant socio-political force, extending its influence beyond liturgy to become a catalyst for social change (Gomes, 2022). This contrasts with many other Asian nations, where Catholicism is a minority faith with limited political impact. Many analysts conclude that the close integration of Church and civil society has resulted in one of the most deeply inculturated expressions of Catholicism in Asia (Rivera, 2022). However, the process is not entirely uniform or without tension. While the local Church encourages cultural adaptation, the Vatican maintains universal doctrine and centralised authority. Debates surrounding issues like liberation theology in the context of Philippine poverty and social injustice highlight the struggle between global Church positions and local needs. These tensions are not merely external but reveal deep internal fractures within the Philippine Church itself. The ‘dual compromise’ is also a struggle between a conservative hierarchy, often aligned with socio-political elites, and a progressive wing of clergy and laity advocating for a ‘Church of the Poor’. This internal conflict shows that inculturation is as much about competing visions of social justice within the local Church as it is about negotiating with Rome (Espina-Varona, 2016; Holden, 2012). Some scholars emphasise that this ‘dual compromise’ – maintaining global unity while promoting local identity – has forged the unique character of Philippine Catholicism, where the Church operates both as a religious institution and a de facto national culture (Gorospe, 1985). Ultimately, the Philippine case illustrates that successful inculturation is a complex and often contradictory

process, weaving together faith, culture, and power in a way that both unifies and divides, empowers and excludes.

Thus, the Philippine case exemplifies a distinctive model of inculturation where deep cultural integration has directly shaped the Church's societal role. The extensive fusion of faith with local customs has not merely made Catholicism acceptable but has rendered it a fundamental pillar of national identity. This profound cultural embeddedness, in turn, has empowered the Church to act as a potent socio-political force, as historically demonstrated. However, this very success creates an inherent tension: the autonomy necessary for such deep contextualisation exists in a state of perpetual negotiation with the Vatican's authority. Consequently, the Philippine experience ultimately illustrates that the inculturation process is not a finite goal but a continuous balancing act between local relevance and global communion.

The South Korean case

In contrast to the Philippines, where Catholicism arrived via Spanish colonisation, South Korea presents a unique case of religious transmission. In the late 18th century, the faith was initially adopted by indigenous intellectuals through their engagement with Chinese Confucian texts that incorporated Christian elements. Consequently, Korean Catholicism is often described as a 'self-propagated religion', having developed its early foundations relatively independently of Western missionaries (Choe, 2013). This unique origin provided a distinctive basis for inculturation, as Korean Confucian scholars were the first to interpret and apply Christian principles within their local social context.

However, this process was fraught with conflict, stemming from a fundamental clash between Catholic doctrine and Confucian ethics, particularly regarding the practice of ancestral rites, a cornerstone of Korean social and family order. The refusal of the early Catholic converts, following Vatican directives, to perform these rites was perceived as a direct challenge to the core moral values

of society. This refusal was not seen merely as a religious difference but, crucially, was regarded by the Joseon court and scholar-officials as a threat to the stability of a society built upon filial piety and familial bonds. Consequently, a series of state-sanctioned suppressions occurred during the 19th century, leading to the execution of thousands of the faithful, many of whom were later canonised by the Catholic Church (Seong, 2024). Thus, the firm response of the Joseon court towards Catholicism should be understood within the context of defending the ‘national orthodoxy’ (國是, gukse) from an alien ideology perceived as corrupting the moral foundations of society. From the perspective of the Korean feudal state at the time, this was not ‘religious persecution’ in the modern sense, but rather a measure aimed at ‘rejecting heterodoxy and upholding the correct way’ (辟異衛正, pyeong-i wijeong) to maintain ideological unity and social stability (Lee, 2024). This episode highlights a critical challenge in cultural inculturation: when a new belief system introduces rules that are incompatible and risk eroding the foundational cultural values deeply embedded in the host society, a defensive reaction from that culture is understandable.

Following the fall of the Joseon dynasty and the Japanese annexation of Korea, the Catholic Church began a deeper social integration. The Church actively participated in the independence movement, notably in the March 1st Movement of 1919, where priests and laypeople joined forces with other nationalist groups. This engagement helped shed its ‘foreign’ image, gradually aligning Catholicism with the national spirit. Scholars argue that this linkage between Catholic faith and modern nationalism was pivotal to its inculturation in Korea (Qian & Zhao, 2025). This alignment, however, also planted the seeds for future tensions. By tying its identity to the national cause, the Church inevitably entered the realm of political ideology, a move that would later resurface during the struggles against military dictatorships.

During the 20th century, particularly after the Korean War, the Church experienced rapid growth. Inculturation was manifested through the adoption of the Korean language in liturgy and the incorporation of local cultural elements in sacred music and church architecture, such as the use of traditional instruments or the design of churches inspired by the hanok style. Scholars describe this as a ‘dual integration’ — maintaining the universality of Catholic worship while reflecting a Korean identity (Kim, 2012). Yet, this ‘dual integration’ was not always seamless. The incorporation of indigenous elements, such as the use of traditional instruments or hanok-inspired architecture, sometimes sparked internal debate between traditionalists wary of diluting liturgical universality and reformers advocating for a more thoroughly Korean expression of faith (Ahn, 2020). This ongoing negotiation demonstrates that inculturation is a dynamic and sometimes contested process, rather than a final achieved state.

Furthermore, the socio-political role of Korean Catholicism in the 20th century solidified its inculturation. During the democratisation movements of the 1970s and 1980s, many clergy, religious leaders, and laypeople opposed military dictatorships. Myeongdong Cathedral in Seoul became a symbolic sanctuary for the pro-democracy movement. By participating in these struggles, the Church established itself as an endogenous social force, achieving a profound level of inculturation (Kim, 2020). This deep embedding, however, also meant that the Church’s identity became intertwined with specific political stances, leading to complex legacy as South Korea democratised, where it now must navigate its role as a moral voice in a pluralistic society rather than a clear ally against a single oppressor.

In the contemporary era, Korean Catholics constitute approximately 11% of the population (Agenzia Fides, 2024). Furthermore, inculturation in South Korea is vividly embodied in the daily life of Catholic families, especially through their adaptation of the Confucian-based ancestral rite, Jesa. What was once a source of historical conflict has evolved into a nuanced, contemporary practice.

Many households now observe a modified form of the ritual, known as *charye*, during major holidays such as Chuseok (Korean Thanksgiving) and Seollal (Lunar New Year). This includes deep bows and the preparation of a ceremonial table, not as an offering to spirits, but as a cultural expression of filial piety and a symbolic meal shared with ancestors. The rite is often integrated with Scripture readings and Christian prayers for the deceased, reframing a Confucian tradition within a Catholic worldview (Park & Müller, 2014). In this way, Korean Catholics honour a foundational cultural value while maintaining doctrinal integrity, illustrating a living form of inculturation that continually reconciles family heritage with religious belief.

Beyond the intimate sphere of the family and daily practice, inculturation is also powerfully evident in the collective piety and global outlook of the Korean Church. Devotions to the Virgin Mary and Korean martyr-saints are deeply integrated into liturgical life, signifying the religion's transition from an imported faith to one firmly rooted in national culture. Simultaneously, the Korean Church now dispatches a significant number of missionaries abroad: in 2020 1,137 Korean Catholic missionaries were serving in 80 countries (Kim 2023), while statistics from 2022 report 1,007 missionaries, including 244 priests, 55 religious brothers, 700 religious sisters, and 8 lay people (Agenzia Fides, 2023). The ultimate testament to the depth of this inculturation is the remarkable transformation of Korean Catholicism from a persecuted, foreign sect into a leading force in global evangelisation. The same community that once faced extinction for its beliefs now exports missionaries worldwide, a powerful irony that underscores its complete adoption and ownership of the faith. This evolution, from self-propagation to self-sacrifice to becoming a sending church, marks the culmination of a unique inculturation process in which Catholicism has not only been adapted to Korean culture but has also become a vibrant and authentic expression of it.

In summary, the South Korean case elucidates a paradigmatic shift in Catholic inculturation, moving beyond mere adaptation to become a constitutive force in the nation's modern identity. Its trajectory — from early conflict through socio-political integration — reveals a critical mechanism: inculturation achieves its deepest resonance not when religion avoids cultural tension, but when it engages directly with a nation's core historical struggles. The synthesis of universal theology with indigenous Korean identity was forged precisely within the crucibles of persecution, colonialism, and the fight for democracy. This process transformed the Church from a foreign implant into an active agent in shaping Korea's social fabric. Ultimately, the Korean model demonstrates that profound inculturation is less about ritual translation and more about a faith's capacity to embed itself within a people's narrative of survival and self-determination, thereby showcasing a truly creative and dialogical encounter between the Gospel and East Asian modernity.

The Vietnamese case

Catholicism in Vietnam possesses a complex historical trajectory, marked by an intricate interplay between religious indigenisation and socio-political conflicts. Introduced in the 16th century by Portuguese, Spanish, and later Jesuit missionaries, the faith initially took root in the coastal regions of Central and Northern Vietnam. A significant early contribution was the development of the Vietnamese Romanised script, or *Chữ Quốc Ngữ* (National Language Script), by Alexandre de Rhodes and other Jesuit clergy (VnExpress, 2023). Although initially serving evangelical purposes, this scriptural innovation ultimately laid the foundation for the modern Vietnamese language, thereby leaving an indelible mark on the nation's cultural history.

However, this initial process of indigenisation faced considerable challenges. Doctrinal differences, particularly concerning the practice of ancestral veneration — a cornerstone of Vietnamese ethical and cultural life — led to

friction with the prevailing regulations of the Catholic Church at that time (Le, 2015). The response of the Vietnamese feudal dynasties to these tensions should be understood within the context of safeguarding the Confucian-based state orthodoxy and social order, rather than as religious persecution in the modern sense. In essence, the historical reality reflected a fundamental tension between the imperative to preserve national cultural identity and the presence of a foreign religious system. During the French colonial period, the position of Catholicism grew increasingly complex. While it enjoyed patronage from the colonial administration and contributed to areas such as healthcare and education, this association also posed a significant challenge to its legitimacy in the eyes of a nation striving for independence (Nguyen-Marshall, 2009).

The reunification of Vietnam under a socialist government in 1975 marked a pivotal juncture, initiating a new era of legal and social adaptation for the Catholic community. Operating within the unified governance of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the Church entered a phase defined by a clear legal framework. The 2013 Constitution (Article 24) and the 2016 Law on Belief and Religion form the foundational legal basis, affirming the right to freedom of belief and religion, whilst simultaneously stipulating that religious activities must comply with national law, ensure national security, social order and safety, and preserve national cultural identity (GCRA, 2025). Within this framework, the Catholic Church in Vietnam proactively shaped its developmental path through the guiding principle of 'Living the Gospel in the bosom of the Nation' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam, 1980). This encourages the faithful to integrate their religious beliefs with civic responsibility, actively contributing to national construction and defence.

In practice, the relationship between the State and the Church operates through mechanisms of dialogue and coordination. Major religious events and the appointment of high-ranking Church personnel are conducted within the legal framework, ensuring a balance between religious autonomy and compliance

with national law. Although this mechanism requires adjustments from both sides, it has demonstrably contributed to social stability and fostered the healthy development of religions, including Catholicism. Consequently, forms of inculturation have been vigorously promoted, evident in socio-cultural practices deeply connected to community life. A prominent example is the pilgrimage festival of Our Lady of La Vang (Quảng Trị Province), where tens of thousands of Catholics and non-Catholics participate in a distinctive religio-cultural atmosphere that embodies national solidarity, all conducted within legal parameters (Archdiocese of Huế, 2017). The architecture of the Phát Diệm Stone Cathedral (Ninh Bình Province) further exemplifies this Vietnamisation, blending European Gothic style with traditional Vietnamese temple and communal house features, standing as an icon of cultural synthesis (Nguyen, 2023). In many localities, Catholic communities have actively participated in the New Rural Development programme. A notable example is the voluntary donation of land for road construction by thousands of Catholic households in Nghệ An province, alongside contributions totalling billions of Vietnamese đồng to improve rural infrastructure (Dân Việt Newspaper, 2025). These actions tangibly realise the guiding principle of 'Living the Gospel in the bosom of the Nation'. Furthermore, the Catholic Church currently maintains over 1,500 preschools and charity classes, 144 clinics and dispensaries, and dozens of social welfare facilities operated by religious orders. These institutions provide direct support to underprivileged children, the elderly, people with disabilities, and the poor, thereby making a significant contribution to the nation's social security and development endeavours (Bui, 2024). These practices indicate that inculturation in Vietnam is not merely a theological adaptation but a process of deeply embedding the faith within the national culture and the socialist orientation, thereby strengthening the great national unity bloc.

Nonetheless, this process is not without its tensions. The Church in Vietnam maintains its fidelity to the Vatican and universal doctrine while simultaneously adapting to the national legal framework, including the 2013 Constitution, the 2016 Law on Belief and Religion, and subsequent implementing documents. These regulations require religious activities to conform to the law, social order, and safety, whilst not contravening national cultural norms. Additionally, as a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966), Vietnam also applies legitimate limitations to religious practice, as stipulated in Article 18(3), to protect public safety, order, health, morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others (Nguyen & Vu, 2022). From a Vietnamese perspective, it can be affirmed that the indigenisation of Catholicism constitutes not only cultural integration but also a process of adherence to state law and religious policy. This represents a constructive adaptation aimed at ensuring sustainable and harmonious development between religious belief, national identity, and the requirements of social governance. Scholars often describe this as a form of "indigenisation within boundaries," denoting a responsible adaptation that allows Catholicism to contribute to social life while maintaining political stability, public order, and the national interest.

Comparative analysis: three models of indigenisation

Placing the three countries of the Philippines, South Korea, and Vietnam side by side in a comparative study reveals entirely distinct historical pathways in the process of Catholic indigenisation. This divergence lies not in the religious essence itself, but in the manner in which this global faith collided with, blended into, and was reshaped by the specific political-cultural entities of each nation. Ultimately, these three models represent three different answers to a common question: how does an exogenous religion become part of a national fabric?

Firstly, the Philippine case exemplifies a near-perfect union between Catholicism and national identity. This process was not merely one of acceptance,

but a profound assimilation, where Catholicism became the core of Filipino identity. The key factor leading to this outcome was the Spanish colonial experience spanning over three centuries. Unlike the extractive colonial models seen elsewhere, in the Philippines, the Church and the colonial state were inextricably linked. Franciscan, Augustinian, and Jesuit friars were not only missionaries but also acted as administrative, educational, and social managers in many rural areas (Zulueta, 2025). This pervasive and comprehensive presence fostered a distinct mestizo culture, where Catholic festivals, such as the Sinulog or Ati-Atihan, were layered upon indigenous rituals and symbols, creating a unique form of 'folk Catholicism'. Consequently, after gaining independence, Catholicism was not viewed as a colonial legacy to be purged; on the contrary, it became a crucial factor distinguishing the Philippines from its Muslim and non-Christian neighbours in Asia. This has rendered Catholicism in the Philippines a *de facto* state religion, contrasting sharply with its minority models in South Korea and Vietnam.

Meanwhile, South Korea represents a process of indigenisation marked by high contention. It began with the reception of Catholicism by indigenous intellectuals but quickly encountered conflict with Confucian norms regarding ancestral rites. The consequence was severe persecution in the nineteenth century; however, this very experience of martyrdom contributed to the formation of a unique identity for the Korean Catholic community. Unlike in the Philippines where Catholicism became the majority faith, in South Korea it constitutes only about 11% of the population, yet wields considerable socio-political influence, notably through its role in the democratisation movements of the 1970s and 1980s. The South Korean model demonstrates that indigenisation is not merely cultural assimilation, but also the assertion of religious identity through conflict and political struggle.

The case of Vietnam occupies an intermediate position between the Philippines and South Korea. Similar to South Korea, Vietnamese Catholicism

historically faced periods of challenge due to its initial divergence from ancestral worship traditions, leading to frictions and restrictions during certain eras. Similar to the Philippines, Vietnamese Catholicism had a phase closely associated with the colonial regime, which cast it as an external element and sowed societal suspicion. However, following the *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) period, Vietnamese Catholicism has gradually been recognised as a component of national life, aided by the strategy of 'living the Gospel in the bosom of the Nation' and its integration into socialist values. This is a distinctly political process of indigenisation, reflecting a dual adaptation: maintaining its universal ties to the Vatican while adhering to the management framework of the socialist state.

From a theoretical perspective, three models of indigenisation can be identified. The Philippines' model of 'comprehensive integration' shows the power of a religion when assimilated into national identity, yet it also carries the risk of conflation, turning Catholicism into a form of cultural-political institution rather than a purely religious faith. South Korea's model of 'contestation and adaptation' demonstrates the resilience of Catholicism in a harsh environment, where indigenisation occurs not through assimilation but through conflict and redefinition. Vietnam's model of 'adaptation within boundaries' illustrates a complex process of integration, where the religion must balance loyalty to the Vatican with incorporation into the socialist system. This comparison shows that Catholic indigenisation cannot be understood simply as a cultural process; it must be situated within its relationship to political power and social order.

A commonality among all three nations is that Catholicism was compelled to address the question of the relationship between a global faith and national identity. While the Philippines resolved this by assimilating Catholicism into national culture, South Korea and Vietnam represent two alternative paths: one building a Catholic identity through sacrifice and political struggle, and the other adapting through dialogue and compromise with the state ideology. This comparison highlights the diversity and flexibility of Catholicism in the Asian

context, while also supporting the broader thesis that the process of religious indigenisation is invariably intertwined with power and politics, rather than being a purely cultural progression. To systematically compare the three cases, Table 1 synthesises the core characteristics of each inculturation model, highlighting the key contextual factors, defining features, and social positions that distinguish them:

Table 1. A comparative summary of Catholic indigenisation models in the Philippines, South Korea, and Vietnam

<i>Characteristic</i>	The Philippines: The 'Comprehensive Integration' Model	South Korea: The 'Contestation & Adaptation' Model	Vietnam: The 'Adaptation within Boundaries' Model
<i>Key Context</i>	Prolonged Spanish colonisation (>3 centuries)	Conflict with Confucian traditions & severe persecutions	Complex history with colonialism and a socialist state
<i>Core Feature</i>	Catholicism is synonymous with national culture and identity (de facto state religion)	Catholic identity forged through struggle and martyrdom	Balancing religious identity with the legal-socialist framework
<i>Social Position</i>	Overwhelming majority, cultural bedrock	Influential socio-political minority	A recognised component of national life
<i>Defining Trait</i>	Deep integration via festivals and folk rituals	Pivotal role in democratisation movements	Strategy of 'living the Gospel in the bosom of the Nation'

Source: Developed by the author through a synthesis of key concepts from the inculturation theories of Schreier (1985), Bevans (2002), and Shorter (1988).

Taken together, the three cases support a single comparative claim: Catholic inculturation in East Asia is co-produced by cultural translation, historical trajectories, and the configuration of political authority. The typology in Table 1—comprehensive integration, contestation and adaptation, and adaptation within boundaries—offers a parsimonious lens for explaining why a global church becomes locally embedded in markedly different ways across the Philippines, South Korea, and Vietnam.

This framework remains preliminary and is constrained by its broad scope and reliance on secondary sources, including uneven access to local-language materials. Future research should test the typology beyond these cases and

employ interviews, ethnography, and archival work to better capture lived practices and subnational variation that national-level comparison may obscure

Conclusion

This study shows that Catholic inculturation in East Asia follows distinct trajectories shaped not only by culture but also by historical pathways and political authority. The Philippines illustrates comprehensive integration, where Catholicism becomes deeply interwoven with national identity and popular festive culture; South Korea reflects contestation and adaptation, where Catholic identity is forged through struggle and sustained socio-political engagement; and Vietnam demonstrates adaptation within boundaries, where the Church navigates Vatican loyalty alongside a socialist legal-political framework, producing a form of socialist-oriented inculturation aligned with national development and social order. Together, these cases support the broader claim that religious indigenisation is inseparable from power and governance, rather than a purely cultural progression.

At the same time, the comparison remains preliminary. Its broad scope limits deeper theological specification, and future work could refine classification using established contextual-theology typologies (e.g., Bevans) while addressing the uneven availability of primary and local-language materials, particularly in the South Korean case, through ethnography, interviews, and archival research. Further studies should also examine subnational variation (regional, ethnic, generational) and test the framework through wider Asian comparisons, including Buddhist- and Muslim-majority contexts, ideally using mixed methods to bridge macro-level political analysis with everyday faith practices. Practically, the tripartite model provides a heuristic for theologians, church leaders, and policymakers to anticipate how historical and political constraints influence intercultural dialogue, mission strategy, and religious governance aimed at achieving social harmony.

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